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Mr T Collins
St Mary's Church of England School, Burton Latimer
High Street
Burton Latimer
Northamptonshire
NN15 5RL

Dear Mr Collins

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Mary's Church of England School

Following my visit with Lynn Lowery, additional inspector, to your school on 9–10 February 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in July 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly Qualified Teachers may be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of Governors, the Director of the Children and Young People's Service for Northamptonshire and the Director of Education for the Diocese of Peterborough.

Yours sincerely

Anthony O'Malley
Her Majesty's Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF ST MARY'S CE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 9-10 February 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed 14 lessons, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, subject leaders, an officer from the local authority and three governors.

Context

There have been no significant changes affecting the school since the previous monitoring inspection.

Achievement and standards

The school's assessment data indicate that the proportion of pupils working at the level expected for their ages has increased since the previous visit. Children in the Reception class have successfully developed skills generally found by this time of the school year, with the highest attainers able to recognise many high frequency words and starting to write their own sentences. In the current Year 2, standards are broadly average in reading, writing and mathematics. More pupils are working above the expected level than in previous years. In Year 6, however, although pupils are making better progress, standards for them remain well below average in English and mathematics because of inadequate provision and unstable staffing in the past.

Evidence from observations of lessons and scrutiny of pupils' work shows that although many pupils make good progress, the progress of the lower attaining pupils is often no better than satisfactory. This happens when lesson introductions and the follow-up work set for them do not help them gain the skills and knowledge they need to catch-up with their peers, and when the support they receive in lessons shows a low expectation of what they can achieve independently.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve pupils' achievement in writing throughout the school and in mathematics and science in Years 3 to 6 - satisfactory

Provision

Since the last monitoring visit, there have been some pleasing improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, particularly for the most able. Practical and creative activities engage pupils' interest; pupils work effectively in pairs and groups, discussing ideas, and thinking for themselves.

For example, Year 5 and 6 pupils showed outstanding ability to collaborate and come up with strategies for systematically investigating challenging mathematics problems. They were highly motivated and a good number surprised their teacher through their ability to draw upon their Sudoku pastime to employ their reasoning skills. In an outstanding Year 5 lesson, pupils looked forward to their next topic 'Around the world in 80 days'. Effective use of the interactive whiteboard introduced Phileas Fogg. Following this input, pupils quickly organised themselves and identified the countries he visited and the oceans he crossed on their globes. Then they planned their own trips around the world visiting continents Fogg had missed out. By the end of the session, pupils had identified countries and landmarks they would like to visit and agreed topics to research independently. They had met their teacher's high expectations. The session was a great preparation for work after the half term break.

Learning is less successful when teachers and teaching assistants have lower ambitions for what their pupils can achieve. Superficially, such lessons go well and behaviour and concentration remain good. However, the pupils' outcomes are disappointing and their progress is not as good as it should be. In both numeracy and literacy activities, the amount of time pupils have to apply their skills independently is sometimes too brief. Teachers are happy with a few words on a post-it note or a handful of answers to mathematical questions as outcomes after an hour of lesson time. Such practice is neither extending skills nor consolidating knowledge sufficiently. The weaker practice has a particularly damaging impact on the progress of lower attaining pupils. In a small minority of lessons, this group spends too much time copying learning objectives into books. Occasionally, the level of challenge is also sometimes too low, as in lessons where lower attaining pupils draw a picture to record their understanding, play with shapes while others are working on repeating patterns or copy sentences written by an adult. Such undemanding activities are one of the reasons why generally the lower attaining pupils are not closing the gap with their peers, despite interventions and some intensive one to one additional support.

The school's curriculum is continuing to promote stimulating and independent learning challenges. The 'Connector Curriculum' gives pupils more opportunities to take responsibility for their learning and the classrooms and corridors have many examples of how keenly they, often with support from home, are tackling independent learning challenges. Newsletters to parents and carers explain clearly how each topic links with different subjects and 'Connector Celebrations', at the end of a unit, include friends and family visiting the school to see presentations of the pupils' work. An extensive range of visit and visitors is also improving the curriculum. For example, during the monitoring inspection, an astronaut was working with pupils learning about space and a police officer was assisting the investigation of the 'theft' of a teacher's laptop. All year groups talk enthusiastically about their use of the information and communication technology (ICT) suite and this resource does allow pupils to apply their ICT skills throughout the curriculum. However, such opportunities are relatively restricted because computers are not available in the classrooms.

The quality of guidance pupils receive to improve their work has not developed sufficiently well since the previous inspection and there is evidence of unmarked work in a small minority of books. More commonly, teachers implement the 'two stars and a wish' policy too generously and fail to draw the pupils' attention to weaknesses in their work, such as errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling and handwriting, and these act as barriers to further progress.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve teaching so that pupils' work matches their needs accurately and expectations of all pupils are higher, particularly for the more able – satisfactory
- develop the curriculum so that it stimulates more active and independent learning and challenges all pupils more – good
- make sure pupils have the guidance they need to improve their work – inadequate

Leadership and management

The actions taken by the school's leaders to improve the curriculum are popular with pupils, staff, and parents and carers. They are helping to ensure the school is always welcoming and attractive. Leaders have also been successful in securing funding for one-to-one tuition on Saturdays and over the Easter holiday, and establishing a science club, run by parents, that is having a positive impact on the standards of lower attaining Year 6 pupils.

With support from the local authority, training and coaching are helping to improve aspects of leadership and teaching. The school is continually reflecting upon the effectiveness of its practice and is bold enough to change any strategies that have proved unhelpful. For example, following evidence that the target setting approach in mathematics was not leading to the expected gains, the school has replaced it with a system of individual targets similar to that used in English.

The letter following the last visit noted the impressive commitment of all school leaders, including governors, to keeping a close eye on the school's performance. Regular meetings with individual members of staff, lesson observations and work scrutinies continue to take place. However, the value of these activities would be greater if the senior leaders gave less emphasis to describing what teachers and pupils are doing and identified much more precisely what the pupils' outcomes in lessons and in their recorded work tells about their standards, progress and achievement. For every lesson observation and analysis of pupils' work, a clear evaluation should be made of the progress made by pupils of all abilities, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve leadership and management so that every teacher is held to account regarding pupils' progress and that leaders at all levels drive school improvement more urgently - satisfactory

External support

The local authority is continuing to monitor the performance of the school appropriately and is soundly supporting the work of the headteacher, subject leaders and teachers.

Priorities for further improvement

Improve the progress of lower attaining pupils by providing lesson introductions and activities that meet their needs and enable them to work in class successfully and independently. School leaders should ensure that evaluations of lessons and pupils' recorded work always comment on the standards, progress and achievement of lower attaining pupils.